

# ON THE PERFORMING BODY IN THEOSOPHICAL-THEURGICAL KABBALAH: SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS

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## *The Performing Body: Between Book and Body*

Two different, and to a great extent, diverging understandings of Judaism have been competing in the last generation: Jews are described, in a more traditional manner, as the people of the book, be it the Bible or the Talmud on the one hand, and, more recently, the people of the body on the other hand.<sup>1</sup> Both evaluations are as illuminating as they are distorting. If the former approach refers more to the centrality of text in the elite culture of the Jews through generations, the latter is connected—as I shall try to clarify below—to the performance of the commandments. The more recent overemphasis on the centrality of the body, salutary as it may be as part of a temporary corrective move toward reaching a more balanced attitude toward Judaism is, in my opinion, not quite a balanced description of the comprehensive and complex historical phenomena known as traditional Judaism. In any case, there are few Jewish literary parallels to the esthetics of the body found in Greek culture.

In terms of what I see as two very different extremes of the wider and more diversified phenomena belonging to this religion, I would

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, ed., *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), Charles Mopsik, “The Body of Engenderment in the Hebrew Bible, the Rabbinic Tradition and the Kabbalah,” in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, ed. M. Feher (New York: Zone Books, 1989), I, 49–74 and Daniel Abrams, *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2004) (Hebrew). In a different manner, the emphasis on the body is evident also in the phallogocentric theory of Elliot R. Wolfson, to which he dedicated several voluminous studies, which envisions a part of the body as the centre of gravity in Jewish tradition, and more explicitly in Jewish mysticism. See, for example, his *Circle in the Square, Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995) and *Language, Eros, Being, Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

say that both the preoccupation with study and the concern with the body should be seen to a very great extent as necessary for what was the main religious *modus vivendi* in traditional Judaism: the performance of the commandments. Without a body one cannot observe the commandments, which is the aim of much personal investment in religious studies, according to rabbinic thought. Thus, an academic discourse regarding the perception of the Jewish body in Judaism should, ideally, involve, concomitantly, the role played by the religious actions dependent on it, and the manner in which the importance of those performances impact on the perception of this body.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, performance is not only a thing done by the body, or impacting on its perception by observers, rather the body itself is changed by the performance of rituals. Suffice it to mention circumcision in Judaism, the coverings characteristic of different religions, the postures and gestures during rituals, and the various ways in which hair is dealt with in various religious groups, in order to understand that performance shapes the body as well as is shaped by it. Also, individual bodies, discrete entities as they may be, have been perceived as part of much bigger bodies, social or religious—*Corpus Christi* in Christianity, or *Kelal Yisrael*—the entire Jewish nation in Judaism, and this integrated vision determined forms of behavior in the individual.<sup>3</sup> Thus, perception of the individual body depends on the perception being integrated into a broader context in this world, or imitating other more “sublime” bodies in the supernal world. To take a famous example: stigmata reflect the interiorization of the events related to one divine body in the remote past, the wounds of Jesus, by a body in the present. The famous theory of astral body, or the king’s two bodies also reflect complex theories that complicate a homogenous discussion of the meaning of the body. The performative approach created different forms of corporeal habits that contributed to the anatomical aspects of the body. The shaking of the body during prayer or study of the Torah is just one example that has been transferred also to other intellectual activities.

The performance of the commandments, or of any other religious action, is not only a matter of the active body, but it also shapes some

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<sup>2</sup> Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 22, 24, and idem, “Eros in der Kabbala: Zwischen gegenwärtiger physischer Realität und idealen metaphysischen Konstrukten,” *Kulturen des Eros*, ed. Detlev Clemens and Tilo Schabert (Munich: Fink, 2001), 59–102.

<sup>3</sup> See Byron L. Sherwin, “*Corpus Domini*: Traces of the New Testament in East European Hasidism?,” *Heythrop Journal* 35 (1994): 267–280.

forms of experience. The daily repetition of the same rituals over years triggers deeper responses, cognitive, emotional or corporeal. In some cases, an approach that may be described as *ergetic*,<sup>4</sup> namely acquiring knowledge or experience by doing, is related to the commandments, and to mystical or magical techniques. In other words, in Judaism in general, and in Jewish mysticism in many of its major forms, there are many instances in which spiritual achievement is not a matter of transcending experience within the body, but may be achieved by means *of* the body. In fact, as we shall see toward the end of the article, the isomorphism between a human and a supernal body serves as a condition for an experience of the spiritual by the corporeal.

This vision does not represent, to be sure, the entire spectrum of approaches concerning the bodies for all Kabbalists. So, for example, the importance of the shape of the body and of ritual performance as described by rabbinic Judaism was strongly attenuated in ecstatic Kabbalah, in comparison to the main schools of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah.<sup>5</sup> It is in the latter that the anthropomorphic, both andromorphic and gynomorphic, images are abundantly found. Though anthropomorphic imagery is used, many Kabbalists also denied them as a gross representation of the divine realm. However, what is of special importance for us is the fact that in these main schools the vision of the various divine powers as *Evarim*, limbs, or members of the supernal man, *Adam Elyon*, plays an important role, not only as part of a depiction of that world but also in order to articulate the affinities between the performance of commandments by human limbs and supernal limbs. The kabbalistic dictum that “one limb sustains—or strengthens—another [supernal] limb” became a widespread statement by the end of the thirteenth century<sup>6</sup> and, in some instances, phrases like “the limb in the Merkavah” or the “limb of the Shekhinah” also recur.<sup>7</sup> This is part of a more comprehensive theory, whose sources are rabbinic, which established a correspondence between the 613 limbs

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<sup>4</sup> See Moshe Idel, *Golem: Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990), XXVI–XXVII.

<sup>5</sup> For the divergences between these two forms of Kabbalah insofar as the way in which the Torah is described in terms of a body, see my remarks in *Language, Torah, and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia*, trans. Menachem Kaluss (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), XIII–XV.

<sup>6</sup> See Iris Felix, “Theurgy, Magic, and Mysticism in the Kabbalah of R. Joseph of Shushan” (Ph.D. diss., The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2005), 37–143 (Hebrew).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

of the human body and the same number of commandments, both positive and negative. It is hard to overestimate the contribution this correlation makes—that envisages the anatomy of the body in the light of ritual—to the development of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah. Unlike the more general and vague isomorphisms of the human shape and that of the divine, according to Genesis 1:26 and rabbinic texts, in the main schools of Kabbalah we can discern a much more detailed, and ritually oriented vision of both the bodies of Jews and of God.<sup>8</sup> The fact that in the main school of Kabbalah the human body became one of the most important symbols of the entire divine structure is a telling development, and one that continues earlier anthropomorphic thought. The peak of this development is found in Lurianic Kabbalah, which resorted to plenty of corporeal and anthropomorphic imagery, much more so than any other kabbalistic school. However, the symbol could play such a central role only because it was a dynamic entity, complex and flexible. This complexity and flexibility constitutes one of the main topics of this study.

On the other hand, the human body is conceived of not only as a reflection of the divine sphere, but in some cases in the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, the extension of the divine body, or as the locus where the divine elements dwell. Likewise, even the soul has been described sometimes in concrete terms as possessing some form, like a sphere, or even a human body.<sup>9</sup> Thus while adopting many of the philosophical theories about the deity or the soul known in the Middle Ages, many of the Kabbalists did not renounce the traditional depiction of these two topics in bodily imagery.

### *Zoharic Interpretations of the Husband's Three Obligations*

In some of the following paragraphs we shall inspect the way in which the husband's attitude to the body of the wife reflects the importance of the body in general, and is related to some form of spiritual experience. However, I am concerned here not so much with the marital, erotic or sexual aspects of the topic, which certainly are present in the following

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<sup>8</sup> See Yair Lorberboim, *The Image of God: Halakhah and Aggadah* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Schocken, 2004) (Hebrew), who pointed out the importance of the extension of the divine form by procreation.

<sup>9</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 73–75.

discussions, but much more in the assumption that relations between bodies may be intended to improve the status of the feminine body, not just that of the male one.

The starting point of some discussions in Kabbalah are the biblical instructions regarding the way in which a husband should treat his promised spouse in case he takes another wife:

If another (woman) he takes for himself, her flesh, her covering, and her *onah* he may not stint. And if these three he does not do for her, then she may depart gratis: there is no silver.<sup>10</sup>

These obligations were intended to safeguard the interest, and to a certain extent the status, of the earlier wife or promised spouse, so that the male would not desert them in case another woman was brought into the family. Though polygamy is at least implicitly assumed, its abrupt impact on the status of the first wife was attenuated. In a significant way, the obligations are part of the effort to defend the weaker party and much less an attempt to create a happy family or to enhance love between the two parties, though also these aims should not be overlooked. These obligations are, however, expressly related to different aspects of the body of the woman, not to her feelings, or even to her sense of honor. Needless to say, these obligations have been accepted and elaborated in rabbinic literature, where additional instructions as to the positive attitude to the body of the woman may be found.<sup>11</sup>

A major shift in the understanding of these three obligations as part of a kabbalistic understanding of Judaism is found in the Zoharic literature. Written at the end of the thirteenth century in Spain, this huge and diversified literary corpus includes developments of early Kabbalah in Provence, Catalonia, and Castile, and also much earlier concepts and themes, all attributed to an important figure, R. Shimeon bar Yohai, who flourished in the second century C.E.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Exodus 21:10. See William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 19–40, a New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 103. For his comments on the biblical text, see *ibid.*, 200–205.

<sup>11</sup> See Abrams, *The Female Body of God*, 152–161, 180.

<sup>12</sup> On this kabbalistic literature, see Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. D. Goldstein (London and Washington: Littman Library, 1991), three volumes; Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993); Charles Mopsik, *Chemins de la Cabale* (Paris and Tel Aviv: Éditions de L'Éclat, 2004), 163–307; and Elliot R. Wolfson, *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford: One World, 2007).

The secret that we found in the book of Rabbi Hamnuna Sabba,<sup>13</sup> that interpreted this verse as [dealing with] *Keneset Yisrael*, as it is written, “Her food, Her clothing, Her duty marriage shall he not diminish.”<sup>14</sup> And if he prevents Her, what is written: “then She go out free without money”<sup>15</sup> as it is written, “where is the bill of your mother’s divorcement.”<sup>16</sup> And it is written,<sup>17</sup> “you have been sold for naught and you shall be redeemed without money.” And whoever prevented Torah from Her is as if he took the duty [of] marriage from the wife and prevented it from her. [Then] She remains like a widow, but not [really] a widow.<sup>18</sup>

Here we have an interpretation that changed the course of the understanding of this verse in the history of Kabbalah. The anonymous Kabbalist attributed to the mythical book of R. Hamnuna Sabba a vision that sees in the biblical verse a hint primarily to the divine feminine power. While the identity of *Keneset Yisrael* in this passage is clear, namely it refers to the last *sefirah*, less clear is who the husband is: the human Kabbalist or the divine *sefirah*, *Tiferet*. I would opt for the first alternative, because of the occurrence of the verse from Isaiah, where the mother is mentioned. If this interpretation is chosen, then the feminine power is described as both wife of Israel and as mother. However, the three biblical obligations have been reinterpreted in accordance with a new religious value, i.e., the rabbinic study of the Torah, which are understood, at least implicitly, in a theurgical manner, namely by assuming that their performance will induce the sexual union of the divine feminine power with her supernal husband.<sup>19</sup>

As in other cases in this layer of Zoharic literature, the precise theosophical symbolism was not made explicit. We do not know, for example, what the symbolic relationships of the three obligations are. However, if the husband or the student of the Torah, and the three obligations are not treated here symbolically, the elevation of the human wife to the status of a supernal power seems to be conspicuous.

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<sup>13</sup> This is an imaginary book quoted in several instances in the Zoharic literature.

<sup>14</sup> Exodus 21:10.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 21:11.

<sup>16</sup> Isaiah 50:1.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 52:5.

<sup>18</sup> *Zohar*, III, fol. 268a. I cannot address here the possible sources of this statement, but they deserve a separate investigation.

<sup>19</sup> I cannot address here the issue of the intention of the wife during the sexual rapports, according to some Kabbalists. See, meanwhile, Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 247–250.

In the later stage of this literature, known as *Tikkunei Zohar*, a more explicit symbolic interpretation is offered.

They<sup>20</sup> are demanding food, covering and *onah*, that is the time of his sexual relation, because it is said about Her: “Her food, Her covering, and Her *onah* will not be diminished.” There is no one that demands the food, that is the Torah, [which is the] food of the *Shekhinah*, and She is the supernal Mother, that is said about Her “Do not desert the Torah of Your Mother,”<sup>21</sup> “Her covering”—this is the garment of *zizit*, and his covering, and the phylacteries of the hand ... and her *onah*—this is *Keryat Shema*, at its [proper] time. “And if he does not do these things to Her”—to the *Shekhinah*—“She will be sold for naught and you shall be redeemed without money” he will exit without shame from the *Shekhinah*, he is insolent.<sup>22</sup>

It is evident that the author is building upon the Zoharic passage quoted above: what was described there as *Keneset Yisrael* becomes here the *Shekhinah*. The discussion is now supplemented by additional details: while earlier the food was Torah, now the covering is the *tallit* and phylacteries, while the *onah* is related to the central prayer known as *Keryat Shema*. Thus, the biblical obligations toward the corporeal wife have been supplanted by the three main rabbinic commandments, which are directed to the supernal divine power. Or, to put it another way, the pattern of the approach to the human wife became the exegetical pattern for understanding the attitude to the supernal feminine power. From my point of view, the process of “elevation” means the dominance of the ordinary directives intended in the Bible to persons active in this world, over what happens in the supernal world, even if some of the Kabbalists would argue the contrary. Let me clarify by saying that the entire passage has to do with those persons who are not doing for the sake of the *Shekhinah* what they should do.

In another passage in *Tikkunei Zohar*, one more step in specifying the precise symbolic “meaning” of each of the three obligations has been

<sup>20</sup> Namely those who are insolent.

<sup>21</sup> Psalms 1:8.

<sup>22</sup> *Tikkunei Zohar*, no. 6, ed. Reuven Margalio (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1978), fols. 22a–22b.

It should be mentioned that in late Midrash and some early kabbalistic literatures the expression *Guf ha-Shekhinah*, the body of the Shekhinah, occurs. See Moshe Idel, “The World of Angels in Human Shape,” in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Philosophy and Ethical Literature Presented to Isaiah Tishby on his Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Joseph Dan and Joseph Hacker (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), 23–32 (Hebrew). The term *Guf* recurs in the book of the *Zohar* in many forms and meanings. See Yehuda Liebes, “Sections of the Zohar Lexicon” (Ph.D. diss. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1976), 168–290 (Hebrew).

taken. After adducing an interpretation based on metempsychosis, the anonymous author attributes to R. Shimeon bar Yohai the following exclamation:

R. Shimeon said: Sabba, Sabba!<sup>23</sup> Open the words more since your words are obscure. That Sabba said to him: “*She’erah*—this is the food from the side of right, since all food emerges from there, as it is written ‘He opens his hand and supplies to all livings, good will.’”<sup>24</sup> Her covering—from the side of left that is the covering of eyes, since there is the incest on the left, since the left side is damaging there, as it is written: “From North the evil will open itself.”<sup>25</sup> And this is the reason why it is said about Isaac: “And it came to pass that when Isaac was old, and his eyes were dim, so that he could not see”<sup>26</sup> and the covering is needed there ... and this is the reason the *zizit* and the phylacteries are Her covering ... and *Onatah*—from the side of the median pillar, that is Israel, namely “Hear, O Israel” because there Her unification is found.<sup>27</sup>

A similar view is found in the Hebrew treatise written by the same Kabbalist, presumably before he wrote the Aramaic literatures that became canonical.<sup>28</sup> Here the three obligations are identified as corresponding to three sides, which are the three *sefirot*: *Hesed*—Food, *Gevurah*—Covering, and *Tiferet*—Unification. The three supernal powers were interpreted in terms of their contribution to the *Shekhinah*, not the other way around. It is She that turns to be the center of the discussion and of the performance of the three major commandments. Their performance, related to the three higher *sefirot*, is subordinated to the special status and vicissitudes of the lower feminine *sefirah*, which preoccupied this trend of Kabbalah. This theosophical interpretation is presented here, just as in the main layer of the *Zohar*, as if it is a profound secret, which is disclosed by the mysterious Hamnuna Sabba. The topic has been presented in the two cases in a manner that reflects a special reverence toward it: even the revered R. Shimeon, the most important figure in the *imaginaire* of Jewish mysticism, needs the disclosure of this topic from the mouth of the mysterious and authoritative figure.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Here again the Sabba is R. Hamnuna, like in the book of the *Zohar*.

<sup>24</sup> Psalms 145:16.

<sup>25</sup> Jeremiah 1:14.

<sup>26</sup> Genesis 27:1.

<sup>27</sup> *Tikkunei Zohar*, no. 69, fol. 100b.

<sup>28</sup> Efraim Gottlieb, ed., *The Hebrew Writings of the Author of Tikkunei Zohar and Ra'aya Mehemna* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2003), 163. See also my Introduction, *ibid.*, 29–35.

<sup>29</sup> On the importance of this figure in the various parts of the Zoharic literature, see



The views found in the last layer of the Zoharic literature did not leave a special impression on Kabbalists until the generation of the expulsion from Spain. It is only after 1492 that this layer started its career as a major source of inspiration for many Kabbalists. One of those who also adopted the view about the *Zohar*'s three obligations is R. Meir ben Ezekiel ibn Gabbai, active around 1530 in the Greek zone of the Ottoman Empire. After quoting the first passage from *Tikkunei Zohar* cited above in translation from the Hebrew, the Kabbalist interprets it as related to the theurgical concept of *zorekh gavoah*, the supernal need, which means that someone performs the commandments for the sake of the divinity, and not for his own sake, described expressly also in this specific context as *Zorekh Hedy'ot*, though the fulfillment of the former has an impact on the latter. In the specific context this discussion is found, as well as in the more general theosophy of ibn Gabbai, the concept of *Kavod*, Glory, as a term representing the last *sefrah*, plays a central role.<sup>30</sup> The theosophically-oriented theory of ibn Gabbai follows the Zoharic discussions, and in more general terms Spanish Kabbalah.<sup>31</sup>

*R. Moshe ben Jacob Cordovero and R. Abraham Azulai*

Though a continuation of the main trends of Spanish Kabbalah, the Safedian Kabbalah adds interesting dimensions specific to this development. It is difficult to discern those additions, but over time and in general we may distinguish between two main additions to Spanish Kabbalah in this way: in Safed more comprehensive theosophical and cosmogonical schemes have been delineated, and on the other hand, a more individual approach to Kabbalah has been articulated.<sup>32</sup> Here, we are concerned with the second dimension of this phase of Kabbalah, since this emphasis on the individual also implies an attitude to the body.

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Yehuda Liebes, "Zohar and Tikkunei Zohar: From Renaissance to Revolution," in *Te'uda XXI–XXII: New Developments in Zohar Studies*, ed. Ronit Meroz (Tel Aviv University, 2007): 279–285 (Hebrew), where the earlier bibliography has been adduced.

<sup>30</sup> *Avodat ha-Kodesh* (Jerusalem, 1973), II:32, fols. 49c–d. See also *ibid.*, III:69, fol. 112a.

<sup>31</sup> See Roland Goetschel, *R. Meir Ibn Gabbai; Le Discours de la Kabbale espagnole* (Leuven: Peeters, 1981).

<sup>32</sup> Moshe Idel, "On Mobility, Individuals and Groups; Prolegomenon for a Sociological Approach to sixteenth-century Kabbalah," *Kabbalah* 3 (1998): 145–173.

Two influential Kabbalists expatiated on the role played by the Kabbalist way of performing the three obligations in order to help the *Shekhinah*. Moshe Cordovero's very popular booklet *Tomer Devorah* and, following him, R. Abraham Azulai's *Hesed le-Abraham*, who wrote as follows:

[a] Whoever wants to have intercourse with the Daughter of the King, so that She will not depart from him forever, should first embellish himself by many ornaments and nice garments, which are the performances of all the commandments,<sup>33</sup> as mentioned above. And after he had prepared himself in such a manner, he should intend to receive Her onto him while he is preoccupied with the Torah and bears the yoke of the commandments according to the secret of the intention of the unification, always. And he should perform three things and then She immediately marries him and does not separate Herself from him, with the condition that he purifies himself and sanctifies himself. [b] And after he is pure and holy he should intend to perform for Her food, garments and sex, which are the three things that a man is obliged to [do] to his wife. The first one is to cause the descent of the influx from the right [side], which is Her food. The second is to cover Her *vis-à-vis* the side of judgment, so that the external powers will not rule over Her, and this is by all the things related to the side of evil urge, that should not be involved in his performance of the commandments, for the reason of the body or in order to be praised, and so on, that the evil urge is found in that commandment, [since] She flees away from him as She is naked. This is the reason why Her nakedness should be covered and hidden, so that it<sup>34</sup> will not always rule over Her. How are all his deeds [performed] for the sake of heaven? [It is by performing them] without the part of the evil urge. And also the phylacteries and the *zizit* are guarding Her greatly, so that the external powers will not rule over Her, and he should be accustomed with [to] them. The third [obligation] is to unite Her with the *sefirah* of *Tiferet*, during the time of pronouncing *Keriyat Shema*, by establishing fixed times to [study] Torah. And when he will establish fixed times to everything he should intend by it to the sexual needs of the *Shekhinah*, the sexual needs of the Daughter of the King.<sup>35</sup>

The passage contains two different centers of gravitation: the individual one [a], and the theosophical-theurgical [b]. Let me turn to the gist of the latter part: The triadic structure of the discussion is obvious: the

<sup>33</sup> In *Tomer Devorah* the version is *Tikkunei ha-Middot*, and I choose the version of Azulai, *Tikkunei ha-Mizvot*.

<sup>34</sup> The subject is not clear.

<sup>35</sup> *Tomer Devorah*, chapter 9. See also *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, trans. L. Jacobs (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1960), 177, copied in Abraham Azulai, *Hesed le-Avraham* (Lemberg, 1863), fol. 54a.

three biblical obligations of the husband toward his wife are described in terms of the relationship between the *Shekhinah* to three divine *sefirot*: *Hesed*, *Gevurah* and *Tiferet*. The obligation to provide food is understood as related to the first of these *sefirot*, the garments are related to the protection against the evil powers, related to the second of these *sefirot*, while sex is related to the *sefirah* of *Tiferet*. These obligations are understood as the meaning of the commandments and the special manner of their performance: while the first one is related to theurgy, namely to the drawing influx from the higher *sefirah* to the lowest one, the second type of performance is related to some form of devotion, which means that whatever someone does from the religious point of view is to be performed for the sake of the *Shekhinah* alone, with any intention to the well-being of the performer. This approach can be described also as apotropaic, since it defends the *Shekhinah* from the evil powers. This is the reason why the donning of the *Tefillin* and the *Zizit*, understood as covering, function as a way of covering the *Shekhinah* from the deleterious impact of the evil powers. This covering may sometimes also imply a dimension of hiding the *Shekhinah*, in order to prevent the impact of the evil powers.<sup>36</sup> How exactly these two commandments that, according to rabbinic instructions, concern only males, are relevant for the guarding of *Shekhinah* is not quite clear to me.

The last form of performance, the *onah*, is related to inducing the *Shekhinah*'s sexual union, achieved especially by the liturgical recitation of the verses in the Bible that were understood by numerous Kabbalists as dealing with the unification of the divine powers. This way to construe the aim of the rituals is focused on the various aspects of the relationship between the *Shekhinah* and the three other divine powers, but it is quite evident that the prime centre of gravitation is the well-being of the divine feminine power, and only secondarily also Her relation to the Kabbalist, or the changes to be induced in the three *sefirot*.

This second center of gravitation in this passage [a] deserves also an elaborate analysis. The Kabbalist's intention is referred as a permanent sexual relation with the divine feminine power, and this is the reason he is requested to perform the three actions that are identical, terminologically speaking, to what he is obliged to do in relation to his human wife. However, while the three obligations toward the human wife also

<sup>36</sup> *Pardes Rimmonim* (Jerusalem, 1962), XXIII:5.

concern his own material wellbeing, the contact with the *Shekhinah* is established by the more complex range of religious deeds, and aims to some form of spiritual experience described as intercourse. We may regard the substitution of the three obligations with the three other commandments as some form of “refinement” of the material deeds with more “spiritual” ones, without however assuming that the material ones are in any way obsolete.

The permanent presence of the *Shekhinah* over the mystic is conceived of as an erotic experience, which the Kabbalist would like to keep, and it is conditioned by his performance. The three biblical obligations of the husband to his wife became therefore the paradigmatic understanding of these Kabbalists of a wider range of commandments. Thus, unlike other forms of explaining the commandments as primarily intended to unify the ten powers that constitute the divine system, or to unify the male and female divine powers here it is the centrality of the *Shekhinah* in that system that inspires the explanation of those commandments. From my perspective this strong affinity between commandments and *Shekhinah* is a major indicator of the central status of the later, more than purely theosophical, statements to this effect.

We may assume that the Kabbalists mentioned above assumed that there are two sets of religious deeds designated by the three obligations: the regular behavior recommended to the husband toward his wife, and the attitude of the Kabbalist toward the supernal feminine power, which involves other ritual actions: Torah-study, phylacteries, and *Keriyat Shema*, which are all envisioned as reflecting these three obligations. Unlike the emphasis we have seen above in ibn Gabbai on the theosophically oriented understanding of the three obligations, in the Cordovero/Azulai text the starting point is the establishment of a permanent relationship between the Kabbalist and the *Shekhinah*, conditioned by the performance of the three obligations, as they were described in the theosophical-theurgical school. Though conspicuously drawing from the texts discussed above, Cordovero’s starting point is the experience of the Kabbalist. It is the “sexual rapport” between him and the *Shekhinah* which commences the passage, and the prolongation of this experience as a permanent one, that recurs in the above passage. Though the theosophical-theurgical aspects are not mitigated, the central role they occupied in the earlier kabbalistic literature has been nevertheless attenuated by adding the ideal of being in constant contact with the *Shekhinah*. Only if the *Shekhinah* has first been treated by the

Kabbalist by means of his devotional performance of the commandments, may She dwell upon him.<sup>37</sup> In a way, the rabbinic system of commandments has become a manner of living in communion with the feminine divine power, just because they first functioned theurgically. Let me emphasize that it is the body that serves as the locus of the encounter with the spiritual.

Let me turn to the description of the ideal Kabbalist, as implied in the passage from *Tomer Devorah*. The ornaments are intended to follow the view of another passage from the same book, to imitate the splendor of the divine male: "And the *Shekhinah* cannot come to him unless he resembles the Supernal Splendor."<sup>38</sup> This is an interesting statement since it assumes some form of anthropomorphism, combined with a vision of the ritual as part of the preparation of the male human body to receive the divine feminine one onto it. The Splendor is not just a form of light, but the *sefirah* of *Tiferet*, which stands in many cases in kabbalistic symbolism, for the masculine power, described as a man.

Elsewhere in his writings the same ideal of *imitatio dei*, again in the context of the three obligations:

Man stands between two females, the physical female from below who receives food, covering and conjugal rights from him, and the *Shekhinah*, who stands above to bless him with these which he, in turn, gives to the wife of his covenant. This is after the pattern of Splendor, which stands between two females: the Higher Mother, which pours out all it requires, and the lower Mother, which receives from it food, covering and conjugal rights, namely loving kindness, justice and pity.<sup>39</sup>

First and foremost let me point out the relational concept of the statement that the male stands between two females. This means that the male body is not described in itself, as self-contained, but in relation to two other bodies: a corporeal and a spiritual one. This is the case also of the female, as we shall see below. The higher mother mentioned in this passage is the *sefirah* of *Binah*, while the lower one is the *sefirah* of *Malkhut*. The situation of the masculine entities that they stand between two female entities is holding on both the theosophical and

<sup>37</sup> For the nexus between theurgy and *devekut* since early Kabbalah, see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 53–58.

<sup>38</sup> *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, chapter 9, 117.

<sup>39</sup> Translated by Jonathan Garb, "Gender and Power in Kabbalah: A Theoretical Investigation," *Kabbalah* 13 (2005): 88–89.

human level.<sup>40</sup> In fact, in the two cases referred to in this passage it is assumed that the supernal female is the source of the influx received by the male, and he transmits it to the lower female power, be it divine or human. The question is whether the supernal male, *Tiferet* or Splendor, is performing the three obligations toward what is designated as the Lower Mother, *Malkhut*. However, for the time being I could not find such a vision of the divine male as performing the three obligations, for the sake of the Lower Mother. In other words, we may ask what is the meaning of two different aspects of some of the discussions of R. Moshe Cordovero: that of the human-divine sexual rapport on the one hand, and that of the Kabbalist toward a higher power that is expressly described as Mother, in addition to its being envisioned as divine, on the other. Are those two aspects significantly combined, and allow a vision that the human/divine sexual relations may sometimes at least be described also in incestuous manners? Those are quite interesting questions that should be addressed in order to better understand Cordovero's attitude to femininity, though we cannot do so in this context.

### *The Rapport Between the Human Male and the Divine Female*

Let me address now in some detail the opening statement of the quote from Cordovero's *Tómer Devorah*. This towering Kabbalist resorts to the verb *le-hizdaveg*, which means to have a sexual rapport with the *Shekhinah*. This experience is described as available to everyone who purifies himself and performs the commandments, not just the paragons of Jewish culture, such as Moses, as it is the case in the Zoharic literature. This is quite an evident instance of the popularization of the elitist views found earlier in Kabbalah by a Safedian Kabbalist. What is the picture that we may elicit from the above passage as well from other instances in Cordovero's books? Is this a bodily experience, a spiritual one, or a combination of the two? What may be the specific meaning of the presence of a feminine divine power onto the Kabbalist?

The Hebrew term that refers to the dwelling of the *Shekhinah* is "he should intend to receive Her onto him while he is preoccupied with the

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<sup>40</sup> On the Zoharic view of the man's relationship to two females, see Yehuda Liebes, "Zohar ve-Eros," *Alpayyim* 9 (1994): 101–103 (Hebrew); Abrams, *The Female Body of God*, 167–174.

Torah.” Therefore the last passage deals with the descent of the divine feminine upon the Kabbalist while he studies the Torah.<sup>41</sup> However, this situation of reception of the supernal female by the human male is supposed to qualify the verb *le-hizdavveg*, and must reflect strong erotic and thus corporeal connotations. An interesting parallel to such a view is found in Cordovero’s *Commentary on the Zohar*:

And despite the fact that the *Shekhinah* is found upon all the people of Israel, the *Shekhinah* is essentially dwelling upon him,<sup>42</sup> and from there she spreads to the entire world. And the reason is that he is a righteous, and despite the fact that the entire world [namely all the people] are unifying the [divine] unity, it is his unification that excels over all. This is the reason why the *Shekhinah* will adhere to him in her [very] essence, while her branches are upon all. And he is the well of the blessings upon the world, as it is said:<sup>43</sup> “The entire world is nourished because of Hanina, My son etc.,” and he is the chariot for the *Shekhinah* ...<sup>44</sup> He causes the existence of the *Yesod* and *Tiferet* in the [lower] world, bound with the *Shekhinah*. And this is the reason why the *Shekhinah* adheres to him, as she is pursuing [*rodefet*]<sup>45</sup> for *Yesod* and *Tiferet* and does not find them but with him.<sup>46</sup>

The theme of the Kabbalist’s body as the chariot to the *Shekhinah* reflects a Midrashic view, according to which the forefathers have been described as such,<sup>47</sup> and it parallels the reception of the *Shekhinah* by the Kabbalist who performs the three obligations. However, here the elite figure is described in quite phallic terms, as some form of surrogate for the two divine *sefirot* related to masculinity. No change of the gender is involved here or in the first passage of Cordovero: the supernal

<sup>41</sup> See also Sack, *Sha’arei ha-Kabbalah*, 265.

<sup>42</sup> Namely the righteous Kabbalist.

<sup>43</sup> Ta’anit, fol. 24b.

<sup>44</sup> *Merkavah la-Shekhinah*. In fact, Cordovero speaks elsewhere in the commentary on the *Zohar* about the human righteous as becoming the chariot for the *sefirah* of *Yesod*. See *Or Yakar*, vol. 4, 1–2, 4–5.

<sup>45</sup> This is an example for the more active aspect of the *Shekhinah*. On this issue see also Garb, “Gender and Power in Kabbalah.”

<sup>46</sup> *Or Yakar*, vol. 12, 192–193; see also Sack, *The Kabbalah of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero*, 53, 218–219.

<sup>47</sup> See *Genesis Rabbah*, 47:6, 475; 82:6, 983. On the mystical interpretations of this dictum, see the learned studies of Georges Vajda, *Le commentaire d’Ezra de Gerone sur le cantique des cantiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1969), 339–351, and Micheline Chaze, “De l’identification des patriarches au char divin: recherche du sens d’un enseignement rabbinique dans le midrash et dans la Kabbale pré-zoharique et ses sources,” *REJ* 149 (1990): 5–75.

feminine power remains feminine and functions as such, just as the human male functions as a male. Thus, we may assert that positing a female entity at the extremity of the divine realm, changed not only the way in which the divinity has been understood to reveal to the humans, but kept for the Kabbalists, males without exception, their masculine gendered self-awareness.<sup>48</sup>

Moreover, according to this passage, it is not the human male, but the divine female, that looks for a sexual counterpart. Also here the process of intra-divine unification, conditioned by what I propose to call theurgy, comes before the experience of communion between the human and the divine. This experience, however, is depicted in Cordovero also in strong sexual terms, which include the identification of the Kabbalist with the divine male potencies, *Tiferet* and *Yesod*, so that the union between the male and female divine powers, that does not take place on high because of the exile of the *Shekhinah*, may take place below, due to the activity of the Kabbalist. In a way, the communion with the *Shekhinah* becomes here not just part of attainment of perfection of the individual, which is prominent in the quote from *Tomer Devorah*, but also recreates the lost union between the male and the divine female, in this world. This may be the way in which Cordovero understood the midrashic statement “the [presence of the] *Shekhinah* in the lower world” as a divine need.<sup>49</sup> Individual perfection is therefore strongly connected to the improvement of the divine. A comparison between the view of ibn Gabbai and those of Cordovero reveals the shift that happened in Safedian Kabbalah: religious achievements are not only a matter of theosophical processes, *zorekh gavoah*, but also of the need of the Kabbalist. Ornaments are mentioned, and their nature has been specified: phylacteries, *zizit* and *tallit*, all of them dependent on the body. The main activities are related to another part of the body, the mouth, as they are vocal: prayer and study of the Torah. Thus, according to this passage, it is not the exit of the soul toward the divine realm that ensures the contact with the spiritual world but, on the contrary, the dwelling of the spiritual

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<sup>48</sup> If my analysis of Cordovero's views about the contact between the human male, basically the Kabbalist and the supernal woman, is correct, it problematizes the totalizing statement formulated by Elliot R. Wolfson, who asserted in his *Through a Speculum that Shines* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 396, that “[i]n the Jewish mystical texts it is always the male mystic visually confronting the male deity.”

<sup>49</sup> See, e.g., *Pardes Rimonim*, VIII:14.



onto the human body.<sup>50</sup> It should be remarked that the kabbalistic approach differs from the famous assumption found in the treatise *Avot*, where it is said that the *Shekhinah* dwells among those who study the Torah.<sup>51</sup> While in the early views, the divine presence is felt among a group of scholars, while the body does not play a central role for such a dwelling, with the Kabbalists, this more vague formulation has been articulated in a more specific form. I assume that in general the more positive attitude to the body as a locus for the encounter with the spiritual feminine that descends because of the preparation and isomorphism has something to do with the impact of the astro-magical or the hermetic traditions dealing with the causing of the descent of the divine realm upon the material, as we shall see in the passage to be cited below.<sup>52</sup>

### *Isomorphism and Theosophical-Theurgical Kabbalah*

Another question related to the centrality of the body and mystical experience is the isomorphism of the human and the theosophical, quite explicit in Cordovero's last quoted text. Its sources, found in early Kabbalah, were the assumption that the 613 commandments correspond not only to the limbs of the human body, but also to the divine chariot, namely the structure of ten *sefirot*, or the divine Glory.<sup>53</sup> In some instances the commandments are described as emanated from, or dependent upon, the divine structure. These views are part of what I propose to describe as part of a process of comprehensive ritualization of the divine world.<sup>54</sup>

Let me address another instance of isomorphism, found elsewhere in the same text:

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<sup>50</sup> For a similar assumption, see already R. Joseph Gikatilla's influential introduction to his book.

<sup>51</sup> *Avot* 3:2.

<sup>52</sup> See Moshe Idel, "Hermeticism and Kabbalah," in *Hermeticism from Late Antiquity to Humanism*, ed. P. Lucentini, I. Parri and V.P. Compagni (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 389–408.

<sup>53</sup> See, e.g., R. Menahem Recanati, *Commentary on the Pentateuch* (Jerusalem, 1961), fol. 23c, R. Meir ibn Gabbai, *Avodat ha-Kodesh* I:8, I:21, II:16, IV:34.

<sup>54</sup> See Moshe Idel, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2005), 215–220.

It is well known that the desire of the supernal entities to cleave to the lower ones is in accordance with the preparation of the latter. A great proof for it is found in the construction of the tabernacle<sup>55</sup> since its members as a whole and in their details correspond to the supernal matters, namely to the supernal chariots.<sup>56</sup> This is the reason why the [supernal] worlds and those chariots are drawn to and pour the influx upon those materials. And since those materials were dead, from their actions there is a hint that the supernal was drawn upon them, and this is the reason why the *Shekhinah* was dwelling onto them and the Glory of God was filling the palace. This is the matter of the body that is similar to the spiritual, and it is incumbent upon the spiritual to adhere to the material out of the strength of its desire to it. And the reason is that the lower entities constitute the substratum of the supernal ones.<sup>57</sup>

This passage is of vital importance to the point above: here it is explicitly stated that the spiritual is in search for the material, just as the feminine power in another passage of the same Kabbalist cited above, was in search for the human male. In both cases, a preparation of the body by means of actions is strictly necessary: it is not the body alone, the passive preparation or the form, that counts but “their actions.” This awareness of the anatomico-physiological whole is essential for understanding the basic structure that inspires the basic approaches of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah. Anatomy alone, just as theosophy, is the starting point for the understanding of this complexity, human and divine, as envisioned by many Kabbalists. Fathoming the analogous structures alone does not suffice for a more profound analysis of the main kabbalistic schools, and the awareness as to the centrality of the supernal dynamics is as necessary as the understanding of the way in which the limbs function on the human level.

However, even in instances when the human body is not conceived as isomorphic to the divine, its role is paramount since without performance there is no intention, which represents the spiritual surplus created during the moment of that performance. Let me offer an example in which the term “body” serves as the substratum for the development of the spiritual, but also as its necessary condition. Thus, we read in Cordovero’s book:

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<sup>55</sup> *Mishkan*. It should be mentioned that in many other cases this term means in Cordovero also “substratum.” See, e.g., in the text to be cited below.

<sup>56</sup> Chariots may point here to the divine powers.

<sup>57</sup> *Pardes Rimmonim*, XXXI:8. For a fuller context and analysis of this passage, see Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 190–191.

When man performs the corporeal commandments, they become a body and a substratum to the spirituality of his intention that stems from his soul. And his intention clothes itself in the deed of the commandment. This is the reason that when there is no intention [accompanying] the commandment, it is truly like a body without a soul.<sup>58</sup> We may infer from it that at the extent that the intention of man related to the deed of the commandments grows, its spirituality will be enhanced and will ascend on high through the ranks ...<sup>59</sup> Behold that when a man has a [sexual] union with his female partner in a proper manner, with the perfect intention to worship Him, blessed be He, in order to unify the bridegroom and bride,<sup>60</sup> and in order to cause into existence onto him a soul from the [supernal] the indeed the Holy One, blessed be He, will cause into existence a soul from the holy souls.<sup>61</sup>

Here the very performance of the commandments is described explicitly as being corporeal and as serving as a body to the spiritual dimension of the performance. The reference to the holy soul is meaningless without the prior conception of the fetus, and the act of sexual union is therefore indispensable for the emergence of the intention, that it alone will draw that soul down from the divine realm. However, this supernal soul is also the result of an act of copulation on high, which is, at least to a certain extent, induced by the lower activity, when understood theurgically. Though isomorphism is not mentioned explicitly, the very appearance of the two couples and their similar activities, point in this direction. However, what is of quintessential importance for understanding the above passage is the fact, mentioned here explicitly, as it is the case in many other kabbalistic discussions, that the sexual relation is not a matter of a bodily perfection of the male, human or divine, but is intended to procreate, namely to generate another body, which is also capable to perform the commandments.<sup>62</sup>

Though the dichotomy between soul and body is quite evident in this passage, a sharply negative attitude towards the body is missing although such a position is found in many kabbalistic discussions.

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<sup>58</sup> That the prayer without intention is like a body without soul is a well-known dictum in the Middle Ages.

<sup>59</sup> Namely the *sefirot*. The ascent of the spirituality is conceived to be a major religious event in Cordovero's view.

<sup>60</sup> Namely the *sefirot* of *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* respectively.

<sup>61</sup> *Pardes Rimmonim*, XXXI:9.

<sup>62</sup> For the paramount importance of procreation in theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, see Charles Mopsik, *Le sexe des âmes: Aléas de la différence sexuelle dans la Cabale* (Paris and Tel Aviv: Éditions de L'Éclat, 2003), 107–148 and Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, index, under item procreation.

Moreover, following some earlier kabbalistic traditions sometimes Cordovero described the male and female principles in the divine realm as equals.<sup>63</sup>

### *Some Concluding Remarks*

Bodies were conceived of by the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalists not as self-contained entities but much more as strictly necessary instruments for the performance of the commandments and for procreation. As such bodies were understood in their dynamic dimension, just as the divine realm was conceived not just as a frozen scheme of divine powers, but as a dynamic realm where the processes are as important as the divine manifestations. Those Kabbalists dedicated two literary genres to the two aspects of the theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah: the commentaries on the ten *sefirot* and the commentaries of the rationales of the commandments.<sup>64</sup> The neglect of the context of any of the two, or the putting in relief of only one of them, may create a partial and thus a distorted picture of the main gist of this type of Kabbalah. By limiting most of the discussions to the theosophical dimension of Kabbalah, namely the configuration of the ten *sefirot*, a more theological picture of the main kabbalistic schools has emerged in modern scholarship.<sup>65</sup> This approach is paralleled by the emphasis on the human body as a topic in itself, separated from the forms in which it is activated. A static, self-contained scholarly perception of kabbalistic theosophy, in part influenced by Christian Kabbalah, parallels a static and self-contained anthropology. The very appearance of drawings of the *Adam Elyon* since the Renaissance in lieu of the much more widespread geometrical drawings in medieval Kabbalah points in this direction.

Thus, while terms related to the body are present in kabbalistic literature, especially in the book of the *Zohar*, the way to better understand them depends, in my opinion, on their being associated to the manner in which the body acts religiously, and in their relation to other bodies.

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<sup>63</sup> See Moshe Idel, "Androgyny and Equality in the Theosophico-Theurgical Kabbalah," *Diogenes* 52, 208 (2005): 27–38, and Abrams, *The Female Body of God*, 164.

<sup>64</sup> See Gershom Scholem, "An Inventory of Commentaries on Ten Sefirot," *Kiryat Sefer* 10 (1930): 498–515 (Hebrew) and Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, XIII–XV.

<sup>65</sup> See Moshe Idel, "On the Theologization of Kabbalah in Modern Scholarship," *Religious Apologetics—Philosophical Argumentation*, ed. Y. Schwartz and V. Krech (Tübingen: Mohr, 2004), 123–174.

Based on the assumption that Jews constitute one big national entity, described by scholars of the Bible as corporate personality, or by the widespread assumption that the wife constitutes the second half of a larger entity, Kabbalists worked with a series of models of integration and imitation, which attributed to ritual operations the power to affect and create other bodies as part of the extension and the proliferation of the divine body in this world.<sup>66</sup> These models regarding the integration or reintegration of the bodies in wider structures are predicated not just on their original shape but on their ritualistic performance.

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<sup>66</sup> On this issue see Lorberboim, *The Image of God*.